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C O N F I D E N T I A L USUN NEW YORK 000512

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/22/2017

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SUBJECT: WAN WALSUM'S PRIVATE READOUT ON JUNE 18-19 WESTERN
SAHARA TALKS

Classified By: Amb. Jackie W. Sanders. E.O 12958. Reasons 1.4 (B&D).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a June 20 meeting, Peter Van Walsum, the mediator of the June 18-19 Western Sahara peace negotiations, told USUN and NEA that the talks between Morocco and the Polisario had gone as well as he could have hoped. He said the role of pro-Moroccan Sahrawis in the talks was unhelpful and shared his impressions of the Polisario as cowed and the Algerians as more flexible than in the past. The key challenge ahead, according to Van Walsum, is to move the next round of talks to a more substantive level by securing Polisario's engagement on the Moroccan autonomy plan. End summary.

¶2. (C) USUN Alternate Representative Jackie Sanders and NEA DAS Gordon Gray met on June 20 with Van Walsum, the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy for the Western Sahara, to

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seek his private impressions of the recent talks. Van Walsum seemed tired, but pleased; while little of substance had been achieved (as expected), the atmospherics had been far better than anticipated. The Moroccans and the Polisario had both elaborated their own positions at length, and each had responded (with Van Walsum's prompting) to the position of the other over the two days. Van Walsum said that he had to intervene to calm the parties only two or three times throughout the talks. The social aspect, at the negotiators' shared meals, was "quite incredible," with the opposing negotiators swapping in Arabic what sounded to him like jokes. The exception to this rule was Khali'henna Ould Errachid, Chairman of the Royal Council for Sahrawi Affairs (CORCAS), who was snubbed entirely by the Polisario negotiators, especially during meals.

¶3. (C) Khali'henna's role in general, according to Van Walsum, was the glaring false note throughout the negotiation. Van Walsum said that while he had not tried to specify the composition of the delegation, he had urged the Moroccans to be "responsible" in their choices and did not feel that their choice of three Sahrawis as delegates met this suggestion. Whenever the Moroccans would speak, they would yield the floor to Khali'henna, which visibly irritated the Polisario and diminished the positive effects of some of the Moroccan statements that had seemed to intrigue the Polisario. At one point, Van Walsum told us, he had a sidebar with Moroccan Minister-Delegate for Foreign Affairs Tayeb Fassi Fihri in which he pointed this out. Fassi Fihri replied, "I am sorry, but this cannot be changed," a statement that Van Walsum interpreted as meaning that the

extent of Sahrawi participation was the result of a royal directive.

14. (C) The Moroccans, Van Walsum said, would have to make a decision. They could negotiate with the Polisario, with the hope of pushing them to an agreement, a path that Van Walsum believed was showing real promise. Alternatively, they could try to marginalize the Polisario by repeatedly and provocatively calling into question its claim to represent the Sahrawi people, as both Khali'henna's presence and the content of his speeches seemed to be designed to do. While the Moroccans had told Van Walsum that they were "shocked" at the Polisario's provocative language, Van Walsum considered the content of the Polisario's speeches to be more than balanced by the CORCAS role on the Moroccan side. It raised in his mind the question of whether the Moroccans were aiming for a breakdown of talks and what he referred to as the "dark scenario," in which the Moroccans' true goal in negotiating was to get cover to unilaterally implement their autonomy plan, with the help of sympathetic countries such as the United States and France. Such a course, he said, would only increase the likelihood of the situation deteriorating again into armed conflict.

15. (C) This would be all the more unfortunate given that the Polisario seemed to be in a corner, Van Walsum argued. He had told the Polisario in private that if they were hoping for the alignment of forces to shift dramatically in favor of them following the next U.S. election cycle, they were fooling themselves. No American administration, he conveyed them, would be willing to see an independent, thinly-populated, and weakly-governed Western Sahara. This seemed to sober the Polisario, which had already been disappointed that President Sarkozy seemed to be as supportive of Moroccan efforts as his predecessor Chirac had been. The Polisario had stayed on topic and had referred to human rights only in passing, as an issue of importance,

rather than dwelling on specific allegations of Moroccan abuses in the Western Sahara.

16. (C) Van Walsum also said that the Algerians were playing a helpful role, verbally showing more flexibility than Van Walsum had previously seen and intervening to calm the Polisario down. They had only balked when, in his opening statements, Van Walsum had made clear that despite the evenhandedness with which the most recent SYG report had treated the Moroccan and Polisario proposals, UNSCR 1745 had given more weight to the Moroccan proposal and the negotiations should accordingly give the Moroccan proposal more consideration. (Note: Incidentally, Van Walsum said, Morocco had balked at the rest of his statement: that because both proposals were mentioned in UNSCR 1745, they should both be presented and responded to. End note.) A member of the Algerian delegation, replying privately to Van Walsum's ranking of the two proposals, told him that "had this been our understanding, we never would have agreed" to join the talks.

17. (C) Still, none of the delegates walked out, and everyone seemed pleased at the way that talks had progressed. All in all, said Van Walsum, the outcome of the meeting was the best he could have hoped for: a jointly signed communique calling for a second round of talks. The negotiators had liked the venue and had agreed to hold the next round there in August - possibly around August 11 (one month after a July 11 UNSC meeting that will consider the SYG report due June 30). Further rounds of negotiations, Van Walsum indicated, might have to take place in Europe to minimize the time difference with the home countries. The second round, though, would be more difficult than the first, which had been only the statement by both sides of their positions and their responses to the positions of the other side without any real engagement on the elements of either plan. The next meeting would have to have such engagement. Van Walsum believed that perhaps the best way to prepare for such a result would be to announce beforehand his intention to begin considering some

of the less controversial issues, and to solicit the input of the parties on what those issues should be; he believed that the appropriate time for this would be at the July 11 UNSC meeting.

18. (C) Van Walsum said the USG could help this process in three ways. First, it would need to convince the Moroccans to stop hurting their own interests through inclusion of CORCAS members and other Sahrawis. Second, and more difficult, would be to convince the Polisario to consider the Moroccan plan in detail in the next round of talks (Van Walsum did not believe that Moroccan consent to consider the Polisario proposal in any more than a cursory way was achievable). Third, a positive press statement by the Security Council after its July consultations would be helpful.

19. (C) Asked about his view on other ways in which the Friends could be of assistance, Van Walsum had no suggestions. He noted the strong role that domestic politics played in Spanish involvement in the Western Sahara issue, adding that its constant calculation of how its interventions would play domestically made it an unpredictable, and therefore unsuitable, interlocutor on this issue. Similarly, France was too tainted by its strong association with Morocco to convince the Polisario that it was acting in its best interest, no matter what France proposed to it.
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